Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: M.L. Friday, at his home near Warrior, AL

10/25/1980

A: This is an interview with Reverend M.L. Friday at his home near Warrior on October 25, 1980. When we were so rudely interrupted, you were fixing to tell about your father and his—back in those days—his inability to get the type of education that we think so easy to get nowadays.

F: Right.

A: So would you…

F: Well, the times were _____ (??) and in the country, too, the work was necessary that the—had to work all, everybody, in order to exist.

A: Now, where had your folks grown up?

F: On a farm. They were raised on a farm.

A: Here in Jefferson County?

F: No, in Chilton County. They were all in Chilton County. That's where I was born, in Chilton County.

A: Now what year were you born?

F: Nineteen and nine.

A: What's your birthdate?

F: June the 2nd.

A: And so about how old were you when your folks did come to Birmingham?

F: I was about six years old.

A: And you started going, let's see, Cunningham then ran from the first through the eighth grade? Was…

F: Yes. And, uh, well, actually, I started going to school, when I couldn't—uh, [you] couldn't go to school until you were seven years old back in them days. That's when you had to—you had to be seven to go to school. And I started at the Avondale—the old Avondale school, the one that used to be over there about 42nd Street and 3rd Avenue South.

A: Oh yes, there in South Avondale?

F: Yes.

A: Right.

F: And that's where I started to school. Then we moved from, uh, South Avondale to North Avondale and I was in the fourth grade when we moved from South Avondale. And I started Cunningham in the fourth grade.

A: Now, at that time, y'all were living on—did you say 40th Street?

F: 40th Street.

A: Right.

F: I lived on 40th Street and 5th Avenue.

A: Do you recall much about your—your school days in elementary school?

F: Oh, yes.

A: Any things really stand out during that time.

F: Well, nothing of importance other that just merely going to school. Other than…

A: What about friends? Did you have any friends during that day that you continued to keep in contact with?

F: Once in a while, we run up on some of them. Not very often.

A: Now, of course, I know the kids at Avondale Mill—they weren't there. What, mostly steelworkers, textile workers' families, do you recall?

F: Well, there were all types going to school; Cunningham School was a big school.

A: What—what size district did it serve? Do you recall how…

F: Well, how far it reached?

A: Yeah.

F: Well, it reached out a pretty good piece around there. Of course, we didn't have any busing. That wasn't—there wasn't anything like that back in those days. A bus—they ever thought of a bus at schools.

A: So that—during that time, it was definitely a neighborhood school type.

F: That's right. That is right. They—we—I walked about three blocks, four blocks to school, but there was some that had further than that to walk. In other words, we had children that lived up in Woodlawn that would walk to Cunningham. Now, in that dividing line, the county, the board of Education would put a

dividing line between the schools, regardless. Now, Woodlawn School was out there, the old Woodlawn School, do you know where it used to be?

A: No, I know where Woodlawn High is now.

F: Well, Woodlawn—the old Woodlawn grade school used to be right there close to Woodlawn High. You know where Woodlawn Baptist Church is?

A: Yes.

F: It was right there next to the church. Part of the church is built on the old school ground.

A: Oh. Okay.

F: And that's where it was at.

A: So, that would have been the next school over.

F: Next school would be Woodlawn. And, of course, Avondale was over there on Third Avenue South, Avenue C, and then the Cunningham School. The Cunningham School took up all of North—ah, East Birmingham and North Avondale, part of Woodlawn, and there was about—oh, we had, I guess, maybe two thousand children in Cunningham School.

A: Now, when your family first came to Birmingham, is that because your dad had this job with Montgomery Coal Washing?

F: Yes.

A: So, he stayed with them his…

F: For many years, many years.

A: During all that time that you was growing…

F: That's right.

A: Now, you mentioned that you had a *Post* paper route.

F: Yes.

A: About how old were you when you started delivering?

F: Oh, I was about twelve, let's see, about twelve or thirteen years old, I reckon. [I was] fourteen when I started carrying papers.

A: Now the *Post* was a morning paper, wasn't it?

F: Uh, ah…ah… it was evening.

A: Evening at that time?

F: Yeah, the *Birmingham Post* bought out the old *Birmingham Ledger.* You ever heard of the old *Birmingham Ledger*? And they bought it out, I think, and first started printing and publishing that paper down on First Avenue about where Sears and Roebuck's is at now, in an old wooden building.

A: Would you go there to get the papers?

F: No, they delivered them out, yeah, they delivered them out, I picked up my papers up on Thirty-Sixth Street and First Avenue. That was down, just below the village. And then I'd come through the village around—all the way through every street in the village. I had every street.

A: I was wondering: did you have a bike?

F: Have what? I never did ride a bicycle.

A: Now, were your folks church-goers?

F: Yes.

A: Back then? What church did y'all go to?

F: Well, Packer Memorial Baptist Church.

A: So, not only were you meeting Avondale Mill kids in school, but many of them went to church there at Packer.

F: Oh, yes. That's right. That is right.

A: Do you—do you remember maybe meeting members of the Comer family as you were growing up before you…

F: Donald Comer?

A: Right.

F: Oh, yes.

A: Did—I know he was a Methodist, but did he attend…

F: And of the services at Packer Memorial? Not that I know of.

A: You'd just see him around in Avondale?

F: Yes, in Avondale. You see, I played baseball, also, for the mill.

A: Yeah.

F: When I got up big enough. And I played for the Avondale Mill Juniors.

A: About how many children from out in the community would play on the mill teams? Or, do you know about…

F: Well, not many. Not many. Because it was more or less, ah, sponsored for the people in the village.

A: I guess they pretty much had first choice. And then if…

F: That's right. That's right.

A: …they could absorb…

F: Of course, I was one of them that kind of stayed around in the village, you know there, and everybody knew me. And, I got a lot of the privileges that many others didn't get, my brother and I. But he never did play baseball. But he and I worked that paper route together. He took half of them and I took half of them.

A: And, by the way, you've already told me about the brothers and sisters, but where did you rank in age of the family?

F: I was the oldest.

A: You were the old. Now, Eva is the—

F: She's next to the youngest.

A: She's next to the youngest.

F: I had a brother just under me. And—and then, Eva's next and then the baby brother, Buck.

A: And, so the brother next to you'd the one you were talking about, y'all would split the paper route.

F: …The paper route, yeah.

A: Did—while growing up, did you ever get involved in other Avondale activities, like going to camp—what was it?—the count Blount Springs?

F: Blount Springs.

A: Did you ever go?

F: No, I've been to Blount Springs, but not in on a camp. Yeah, I went to Blount Springs, oh, on Sundays back in them days when the camp was there. But I never I go on a camping trip with them. In fact being, I am pastor of the Blount Springs Church.

A: Really?

F: Yes.

A: That's—that's something.

F: Yeah, I know all about Blount Springs.

A: This is getting off the subject then, I guess, but you just have that one church…

F: Yes.

A: …or do you have two?

F: Just that one church.

A: so, it's—I guess it's fairly near here, because I noticed you had a Blount County tag. I didn't realize that—

F: Oh, yes. This is Blount County.

A: …I'd gotten out of the county yet.

F: Yeah, yes. This is Blount County. No, the church is about ten miles from here.

A: That would be, what, north of here, I guess?

F: Well, it's kind of northeast.

A: Yes. This section of the country is just beautiful to me. I drive from Birmingham to Cullman.

F: Yes. That's the reason I love it out here.

A: I could live with this, definitely.

F: Now, I lived most of my life, well, all of my life in Birmingham. The last years of my life, that is, well, when I put a start when I was married, I started living in Irondale.

A: Okay, I have a question then here about that. What year did you get married?

F: You done asked me once now; that is hard to remember. Ah, it was about nineteen and thirty-three, I reckon, somewhere around '33 and '34.

A: Y'all moved out to Irondale.

F: Irondale, we lived in Irondale. And I lived there until about five years ago. Then I moved up here.

A: Now, what had you been doing? I guess you have been between twenty and twenty-nine (??). So, what were your first jobs once you got out of school?

F: Ah, working for Montgomery Coal Washing. I learned a machinist's trade at Montgomery Coal Washing.

A: And, let's—for the time being, let's just skip over the Avondale period and catch up on what you've been doing since then, and I'll come back to Avondale.

F: Well…

A: So, you left… After you left Avondale, where did you next start work?

F: I worked in two or three different shops back in them days; that was back in the Depression and all. I worked for Hardy-Kines and didn't work there for very long. And then I worked for—there in East Birmingham, Bronze Manufacturing Company. I worked with them for a good long while. I was a master mechanic for them, worked with them for a pretty good while. Then I went to Vulcan Rivets in about 1939, I reckon. No, it was a little earlier than that. Anyway, I worked for Vulcan Rivets for about five or six years. I was master mechanic there. And I left Vulcan Rivets and went to Lamison and Sessions. And I worked for Lamison and Sessions for thirty-five years.

A: Now, I understand from your son-in-law that you started moving up the ladder there.

F: Oh, yes.

A: So you started out there. Did you get to start out as master machinist or did you have to start at a lower…

F: No, I started out as just a machinist, first class. I worked it about, oh, it was about a month. Two months as a machinist. And they put me on then as management. And I stayed in management until I retired.

A: Oh, what was your position when you did retire?

F: Ah, I was Tool Room Super—Superintendent.

A: Now Sessions is—is it still in North Birmingham?

F: Uh-huh.

A: Do they have just the one plant, or…

F: Oh, no. They added to it.

A: It's a much larger organization.

F: Oh, yes. We were the biggest fastener op—company on earth. "We"—that's what our motto was: "We Fasten the World."

A: ... "Fasten the World Together."

F: That's right. That was our motto. We were the biggest fastener company on earth.

A: Now, you have retired now?

F: Oh, yes. I've been retired now since 19—oh, about five years. I've been retired about five years.

A: Now, were you in the ministry throughout this time, or…

F: No, for most of it.

A: When did you first get a—

F: I guess I went into the ministry in about nineteen and—somewhere around 1940, somewhere around then. I was pretty young.

A: Was there any specific event in your life that caused this? Or was it just something that you grew into and then felt the call?

F: Or—no, no. Very definitely, the Lord had a hand in it, 'cause I used to be kind of rowdy.

A: Yeah.

F: Yeah, he definitely put a stop to that.

A: So, that occurred fairly near the time, I mean, ah… your—as you put it—your ceasing to be rowdy and then, the call you felt occurred fairly close together?

F: Oh, yeah. Yes.

A: In other words, a hundred and eighty degree-type experience.

F: I fought it for about two years because I just couldn't understand it.

A: Yeah. You couldn't see yourself—

F: Uh, ah… not being a minister. But, it got to the point that I had to do something. A man don't know what it is unless he experiences it. You got—you got to go down the road before you know what it is.

A: Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm tending to wonder about some of our modern-day folks, if they really just feel the call or if they—

F: If some of them go into it as a vocation—

A: As a profession.

F: Yes, that's right.

A: That worries me at times.

F: Yes. It's just like I've said many times—are you a Christian?

A: Oh, yes.

F: We're going to have a Rapture one of these days. And when that comes, there's going to be a lot of churches that are not going to have to hunt them a pastor.

A: Yeah.

F: A lot of them. And they're just still going to have the same pastor. That's for sure.

A: Now, we have—we have discussed your, your professional changes and your career. I imagine at the same time, you were having a family.

F: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I've got four children.

A: When, or about when, were they born?

F: Well, my wife and I were married about three, three years before Elaine was born, that's Ray's wife, the one you was talking with—that first one.

A: Oh, yes. Yes, okay. I never did get his name; he just came up after class.

F: Well, Ray was his name. Elaine is the oldest child and she was born back about nineteen and thirty-eight. I reckon somewhere around there. I don't really know what her birth—what year she was born in.

A: So, you had…what, two, did you say, two daughters and two—

F: Two daughters and two sons.

A: Well, that's a nice way to have it, I guess. We have a son and a daughter.

F: Well, I had two daughters and then two sons. And I'm really proud of my children. I really am.

A: That's great. I know I'm the oldest of six and I think we've turned out fairly well, thus far. We…

F: That's wonderful.

A: …still have a daughter. My folks still have a daughter just in—in college.

F: Well, I tell you, back when my children was coming up, we was raising them—times wasn't like they are now. We're living in an age now when it is—it is absolutely pitiful.

A: It is. Tell me. It's rough.

F: And it's going to get worse. It is—it is bad on people that are raising their children today. They'd better be very, very careful with their children.

A: Well, it's like in our case, and I guess this is one reason that—in spite of the pay and so forth—that I will stay in teaching is the fact that—that I have enough free time to spend with the kids to offset the outside pressures that many of them feel. I mean, they get it at school. They get it through media, television.

F: That's right. That's right.

A: And in many ways, if parents don't watch it, they lose control long before the teenage years.

F: That's right.

A: So, it is rough. I'm glad you recognize that.

F: Oh, it is pitiful. And the thing of it is, it's not—it's not getting any better; it's getting worse. And we get some of these, this delinquency, that they talk so much about—child delinquency. It's not child delinquency.

A: It's adults.

F: It's adult delinquency. Yeah. They're just too easy-going. They're not getting involved in their children's lives. They don't want to. I see that at church.

A: I've had friends who tell me that as they were growing up, their parents said, "You aren't going to get in the way of my professional goals or my lifestyle," you know? And that must be a real trauma for a kid.

F: It is. It is.

A: And, of course, many other children…their parents don't say that, but—but they live it.

F: That's right. And there's so many children confused. They're absolutely confused today. They don't know that they want.

A: Yeah, the different signals they're getting.

F: That's right.

A: So, the last—the last recollection we had of where you were living, you were out in Irondale.

F: That's right. Well, I lived there for many years. Yeah.

A: Did you move directly from there to here?

F: Uh-huh. Sure did.

A: Bought some acreage, I take it.

F: That's—twenty-three.

A: Right here. All on top of the hill here?

F: Right here together.

A: That is very nice. What led you to move out here?

F: Well, I got this place and it was so nice, I liked it—liked the surroundings there. So, I just bought it.

A: Yeah.

F: Got out of that city.

A: Yeah.

F: I was tired of that city.

A: Yeah, yeah. It's rather had to relax in a city.

F: Well, you kind of _____ (??)

A: Yeah, I'm already feeling that at my age. I'll probably get farther and farther out as time goes by.

F: Well, it's better.

A: Yeah.

F: It is really better.

A: Well, I think it helps get things in perspective.

F: It does.

A: To get away from it all.

F: That's right. And you're quiet out here. You're not—

A: People come to see you, they mean to come to see you. There's no doubt about that.

F: Well, as far as that's concerned, we have a lot of that—company, as far as that's concerned. We're not lonesome. It' just at night here, you're not—you lay down and go to sleep. You're not waking up with old automobiles and trucks and trains and what-have-you. You sleep all night—sometimes you hear a dog bark.

A: Yeah. Let me, first, get the rest of this form filled out. You said you had two sons and two daughters.

F: That's right.

A: And, of course, you own your own home. But did you—when did you first buy a house?

F: Oh, when we first married.

A: So, that would have been about '33, somewhere in there.

F: Yeah. I owned two homes there in Irondale. I bought two places. We lived in one of them and rented one.

A: Of course, you are a Baptist.

F: Right.

A: You attend the Blount Springs Baptist Church.

F: Right.

A: Now, is the location—would it just be Blount Springs?

F: Blount Springs. Right in the middle of Blount Springs.

A: Now, we start getting to the textile work part. As we were talking on the phone yesterday, you figure that you started work in Avondale, would this have been about the time you got married?

F: That's when it was.

A: Okay. And you worked there for how long?

F: Oh, about a year, I reckon.

A: Okay. You've already gone through all the other companies you worked with. What job did you have in the—

F: I was a doffer in the spinning room.

A: Now, I know that, of course, your sister worked at Avondale. Did any of the other members of your family work there?

F: No, no more. Nobody else.

A: So just Eva, is it? It's Evelyn, right?

F: Eva.

A: Eva.

F: But did she work there?

A: She worked there in the spinning department. Well, did she?

F: Not that I know of. I just—

A: No, she didn't. That's right. She married, of course, someone who did (??). But she didn't work in the mill herself.

F: I was going to say if she did, I don't remember where it was. I thought I was the only one who worked there.

A: Now, you had mentioned that you had started out with the Montgomery Coal Washing Company.

F: Yeah.

A: Was there any union activity there?

F: No. Not at Montgomery Coal Washing. That was before the union ever started, even it organized.

A: Now, now, what? Did the hard times just 'cause you go get laid off there? Or, what caused you to go with Avondale?

F: Well, not. One of the main things was not regular work. This was during the Depression. I mean, right in the middle of the Depression.

A: Yeah, '32, I think was really when it bottomed out.

F: Yeah. And when I first married—Sybil and I first married—was when I worked at the Avondale Mills. I had been working there, maybe I had worked there a little longer than a year, probably nearly two years, I reckon.

A: Did you come in with that—the second shift under NRA? Was that when you hired?

F: Yeah, yeah. You mean—no, I was there when they struck.

A: Yeah, yeah. But, ah, it was a one-shift mill until '33.

F: That's right. Well, that's right.

A: Then when NRA came in, they added the second shift.

F: That is right. That is right.

A: And so you were fixing to tell about you and your wife being married, and the struggle—

F: Well, when we married, the mill came out on a strike in about, oh, we married on Christmas. And it was about the middle of the summer or so. I say the middle, about the starting of summer when they had the strike, around May, I think, somewhere around in there.

A: Now, you had mentioned on the phone that you were in the union at that time.

F: Yeah, I joined the union.

A: Had you already joined it before the strike, or…

F: Yes.

A: Do you recall how much before? I know they started organizing back in '33.

F: Yeah. I don't know how long I'd been there. Pretty good little while, I reckon, about two or three months, probably, when I joined the union.

A: Do you recall who approached you, or—

F: No, I don't. I don't remember.

A: Was it just talking there on the frames about whether or not to join one?

F: Well, they were. All I can remember is that, ah, it—there was three or four of us—buddies kindly—and we talked it out among ourselves, what we thought about it, and we went together, and joined the union.

A: Who were your friends, do you recall?

F: Oh, they was people that worked there in the spinning room. Just men that worked together. And we just went and joined the union. 'Course, I didn't have any active part in it, like a committeeman or nothing like that.

A: Who were the active people there?

F: Oh, I don't know.

A: I know George Smith was the president.

F: I remember him. I don't know who the committeemen were, for instance, none of the active members. I never did attend one of their meetings. I just joined.

A: Yeah, I think Albert cox was one. So you joined and then kept working, of course.

F: Yeah, for a while. I didn't work too long after that.

A: And then, the strike occurred.

F: Yeah.

A: What do you recall about the walkout? Were the workers given any advance notice or did someone just say, "We're walking"? Or…?

F: I reckon. Only thing I know is that they called me, you see, I was on the evening shift, that they said they was struck. And I didn't even go down there; I don't know what happened.

A: Yeah, in other words—

F: I lived in Irondale at that time, see.

A: Yeah. That's another thing I was wondering about. Did most, of course, I know it is very difficult since you lived away from the mill, to know a great deal about who was in the union and who wasn't, that sort of thing. But did it seem that most people who joined the union were people like yourself who lived out and—

F: Now, I couldn't say that. I don't know.

A: Another thing I was wondering about, and at least you can talk about if from your personal perspective, you'd been a machinist, which was a very highly-skilled position, relatively speaking. Now, you become a doffer in a textile mill. I was wondering if people with good skills tended to be the people who joined the union, who felt that their wages should be better, that sort of thing.

F: No, I don't think that had anything to do with it, back in those days. Ah, the people, now for myself, for instance, I wasn't making any too much more money even when I was working regular as a machinist. Because the hourly rate, back in those days, top rate, and, well I call it "special rate" was about sixty-five or seventy cents per hour.

A: And, of course, like you say, as a machinist, the question was how many hours you would get to put in.

F: Right. And when you—when you summed it all up, like for instance, maybe I got to work one day on my job at the shop and then I could go down to the mill, go to work down there—'course the hourly rate was a lot less, alright enough. But if I could get in five days a week, I could make more money at the mill that I could on my job. Well, that's what counted back in them days. You didn't—you didn't count the—the—how much you was making an hour; you was counting how many days you could get.

A: Now, I don't know if you remember this guy or not. He's—he, along with you, is my "rags to riches" story thus far. But, Henry Cox worked there about the same period you did, although I think most of the time, he was in the cloth room. And he recalled how, unless you had been in a cotton mill back then, there is virtually no way to describe things like the lint in the air and that sort of thing. What about the general working conditions?

F: Well, it—it was, in those days, the mill, part of it. I wouldn't have wanted to work the; it was dangerous. It—no, it couldn't, no way pass the standards of today of the working conditions. Have you ever been in a textile mill?

A: Uh-huh.

F: Ever been in a weave shop?

A: Yes, and I came out with a splitting headache, too.

F: Well, it—the noise in a weave room, what they call them, and that at Avondale, there were two stories of that weave shop: bottom story and the second story. I worked on the top story, fourth. You could open the door going into them weave rooms and it near about knock you down, the noise. You couldn't—you couldn't hear your own self holler.

A: Well, that's the trouble I was having. When somebody was giving me a tour through it and you had to get right up to their ear and then yell for anyone—

F: That's right. But I want to tell you a little secret: did you know you can stay in there for a little while and get used to that and you might near talk together like you and I area talking here, now. I guess you get to where you can read one another's lips.

A: That's what I had figured. Others had told me that, and that is what I had told them, that, because that then is too loud.

F: That's right.

A: So, I think it is—you get used to watching people's lips and understand them.

F: I reckon that's what it—because they could understand one another.

A: Now, as a doffer, you were working in the spinning room.

F: In the spinning room.

A: About how many men and how many women worked in there?

F: Oh, my Lord. I don't—I don't have any idea. I never thought of it really.

A: But in the spinning area, I imagine most of them were females, other than the doffers.

F: Yes. That's right. Yeah, very seldom did you ever see a man spinner. Very seldom.

A: That is the thing that I—I've gotten the 1900 census. And the 1900 census, it seemed that if you could get a job, you got one. There were a number of spinners who were male. Then, over the years, of course, it became pretty much a female category.

F: Yeah.

A: So, you said that when the strike occurred, you just figured there's no—no need going in.

F: Right.

A: Had the person who informed you of the strike said, "We'll walk off…" I think—what was it? "...At six o'clock"?

F: I don't know.

A: Or they just said it would occur?

F: I don't remember how that came about. All I know is that they struck and we's all out of work. I don't even know how long that strike lasted. I done forgot.

A: I've heard some people say eleven weeks and others say thirteen. It was quite a while. What did you do during the strike?

F: Anything I could find to do.

A: Just fit in a job here or there?

F: Yeah.

A: To get by?

F: Anything we could find.

A: Now, you were working, you said you were working the second shift. Had they—had they gone to three shifts? Or they were just still two shifts?

F: Just two shifts when I went to work there. Now, they went to a third shift after the strike, I believe it was. No they didn't.

A: No, it was some time after—

F: No, it wasn't. Because when I went back, I believe I went to work at ten o'clock at night, the way went to working during that, went to work at ten o'clock and worked until six in the morning. I believe that's when—when I went back. That's the way we worked (??).

A: Now, now, did you go back at the time—right after the strike, everyone was put on half-time. Do you—do you recall that period?

F: Yeah, yeah. For a little while.

A: So, I imagine the Christmas of 1934 was not the best one you ever had.

F: Oh, no. No, we'd seen lots of pretty bad noes back in them days. The people today don't realize what the Depression was. Ain't no way they can realize it. Well, the person that had a job—he was fortunate, very fortunate. Blessed is more the word for it.

A: Yeah. Now, if you—if you don't want to go into it, I'll understand, but I was interested earlier you had said that before become a minister, you had had a fairly rowdy lifestyle.

F: Well, okay.

A: Which would include the textile period. I guess, you may have settled down some.

F: Yeah, yeah. That's while I was working in there.

A: From the secondary materials that I've read, the textile mill environments seemed to be not what middle class whites would consider the best environment in the world.

F: That's right. That's right.

A: Ah, for instance, take drinking. I understand that, from another person I talked to, that although workers would not come to work in such a condition, that fairly often on payday or at the end of the week, they would tend to go on a tear.

F: Well, that—that doesn't only apply in the mill there. That applied pretty well everywhere you went. Yeah, there was a lot of that. That went on and it still goes on. I guess it's greater even today than it was then, because there was Prohibition back in them days and it was pretty hard to get whiskey. But, it was—there was quite a bit of it.

A: Now, at least, Donald Comer made this statement to the—the stockholders, that in order to put down the union sentiment that was growing, he pointed out to the stockholders that not only was the president of the local illiterate, but he was also the local bootlegger. Do you know if that assertion was true?

F: No, I didn't even _____ (??) him then.

A: No wonder the strike failed. It seems to me from what you've been telling me that—that there were many of you in the mill that had sentiments for better wages and better conditions, but that they union organizers were the ones who were doing a fairly poor job of—

F: Well, that's true.

A: …of getting the story across.

F: But that didn't apply there at Avondale. I've seen that in other places, also. I've seen that at Lamison and Sessions. It was the very same thing. The heads of the local would be pride and absolutely done-in. And as far as the local was concerned, as a whole, wasn't worth a dime.

A: Yeah, well my father-in-law's a steel worker and he doesn't get into this sort of thing very much, but—but you never hear him talk about the union except contract time. And it seems like those who try to climb the ladder sometimes are thinking about themselves. Let me flip it over. We're about out here.

[TAPE CUT OFF]

A: And now, how did—once y'all came back after the strike and were on half-time, there must have been a great discussion about the union activity, the fact that it failed, why it failed, and who was to blame. How did—how did the workers react to it?

F: Well, as far as I know, I didn't—I didn't see any of that discussion going on.

A: Yeah. Most people were just glad to be back?

F: That's right. That's right. 'Course, those that—well, that applied not only to Avondale but everywhere else. Them that wasn't for it. They had a grudge against all them that did.

A: Did you feel much of that type pressure?

F: Naw, it didn't bother me.

A: But they did let you know what they thought of—

F: Oh, yeah, yeah. They wouldn't mind telling you what they thought. Of course, I guess, we told some of them what we thought, too. But, they did have a grudge against—

A: Now, also, at, I'm not sure, when did Eva and Ed get married? Was this before?

F: Yeah, that was before the strike.

A: How did the family relationships go? Because of course, Ed was superintendent of the spinning room at that time.

F: Well, they had a hard time; everybody had a hard time.

A: But, I mean as far as—as their attitude toward you, having been—

F: Oh, well. That didn't have any effect on me. I don't know what they would say to my back, but…

A: But—but things, relationships continued to be alright.

F: Yeah, I didn't pay any attention to that. Just no difference.

A: I was wondering about some of the families in the village. I understand it was pretty much a tight situation with some members of the family would join the union and others wouldn't. And it was just the—

F: Well, I expect there was a scene in there. 'Course, I—I don't know how that went, now. I didn't live down there, then. And I don't know what went on. The fact of the business, I never even go down there during the strike. I never did pull any picket duty or nothing like that.

A: Now, while y'all were in Irondale, did you continue to go to Packer, or had you gone…

F: For a while. We went to Packer Memorial for a while and—

A: But, by that time—by the time of the strike, had you left?

F: We had, yeah… we had built a church there in Irondale and we were going to church out there at Irondale. And incidentally, it was a Methodist Church.

Unidentified Voice: It was the only church in the community.

F: It was a Methodist Church. I held every office in a Methodist Church that you can hold, and was a Baptist. You ever heard of that?

A: No, I haven't. That is something.

F: I held every office in that church, except the District Superintendent. I even pastored it.

A: Yeah. That's pretty neat.

F: Sure did.

A: Now, in looking back over your experience with Avondale, how would you compare your experience with one of the other people I've talked to who'd worked there, like I mentioned, earlier for a short period of time(??)? He said, "The thing that has kept me going for many years is the fact that I knew I didn't want to be back in a cotton mill again."

F: Well, I don't know. He must have worked there longer than I did, 'cause it didn't get to me like that. 'Course, like, I say—I wasn't—when I went to work there, I wasn't looking for this, a life-time job to begin with. And I just went to work there just because I could get more money during the Depression, make more money. And I knew the first time that I got me an opportunity to me a good (??) job, I would go get it. Because a man doesn't spend four years, or hard years, like they were in those days learning a trade like I had and then waste it in a place like that. So, I didn't have any ideas of even staying in the mill. That was never present.

A: Okay, this brings up another question that we historians have wrestled with for many years: what keeps a person in a cotton mill?

F: That I don't know. Now, that I don't know.

A: But, you must admit that's an intriguing thing, because from what I can gather, it's not a challenging—

F: Well, now, you take those people there in Avondale, I reckon more-or-less they maybe are borned into it. They had cheap houses, but good houses. And Donald Comer worked them people for nothing. They didn't cost him anything, hardly, to run that mill. And then, he got part of it out of tem for that house they lived in. Well, the clothes that went on their back, they usually bought scrap cloth out of the cotton room and made their clothes, women did, professionally made their dresses. Well, you might say then, he got all the money for their clothes out of them. And he had a good thing going.

A: Yeah.

F: A good thing.

A: No doubt about that.

F: So, it's people that—it's kind of like sometimes I get into and start thinking about it, I don't something back then, during the Depression, talking about what we did, while ago, about anything you could get to do, I got into to something that gives me a little idea about what you was talking about—about the people in the village. Did you ever get around a sawmill camp?

A: No, never have.

F: Well, there's another one. It's a—I believe a step lower than the mill. People get in these sawmill camps, like the one I have experience with. I was hauling lumber and logs out of the woods. And there was people there in that sawmill camp that, well, I worked my own self for about a month, and I didn't get a dime for my wages, never did get anything. Never did.

A: Was it all going to the company store?

F: No, he just didn't pay me. I just worked for nothing.

A: Yeah.

F: Get up at daylight, and worked sometimes until after dark, and never got a dime. The only thing that I got—and incidentally I was furnishing my own truck—the only thing that I got out of that man was my gas bill. That's all. And the people, now, that was working for him, was the same way. He'd buy their groceries, maybe pay their grocery bill, but I don't guess they ever got any money at all. But, he didn't get the second month out of me.

A: That was it.

F: That was it.

A: Well, back to the Avondale situation. I was wondering about, as I've tried to figure out exactly what had brought on the strike, as long as it was a one-shift mill, most people could live in the village, which was subsidized housing, and work in the mill, and unless you wanted to, you didn't have to live outside the village. You know, there was a decision.

F: That's right.

A: But when it went into a two-shift operation, people had to lie outside the village and work in the mill.

F: That's right.

A: Was there any friction due to that? I mean, I'm sure most people living outside the village had to pay a higher rent.

F: No, I don't suppose. I—I never heard of anything like that, of being any friction. People that came in got jobs. Naturally, the majority of the work there was piecework anyhow. And they—they wasn't brining any friction of any kind that I knew of.

A: Okay, I'm still trying to work back into—into what would account for the strike itself. Another thing I had thought of was why the strike in the first place? Let me explain what I mean. Before NRA came into being, the textile workers were working fifty-five hour weeks, ten hours a day, and a half-day on Saturday at minimum wage of about ten dollars a week. Now, under NRA, the number of weeks were reduced, the number of hours a week was reduced to forty and the minimum wage went up to twelve dollars a week. All right? Still with me on this?

F: Yeah.

A: So, that accounts, that would mean a nice percentage increase in the wages. Now, why would it be that less than a year after that, the workers would strike?

F: Well, I guess they got a taste of that little bit better money, see.

A: That's what I'm wondering.

F: And, the fact of the business is it hasn't stopped.

A: Uh-huh.

F: Whenever that started going up like that, that greed, I reckon it maybe call it greed for more money, has never slacked up (??). And it's still going.

A: Yeah. And back then, I'm wondering also, they must have felt that FDR was in sympathy with their cause. You know, that the government would, you know, back them up in any demands for—

F: Well, I don't know what exactly what started the CIA, the CIO—I don't know where it originated. I don't know how it got started. But I do know that there was a lot of people talking, back in them days, about the union. Some for it, some against it. But there was a lot of talk and they was people you would hear about, one organized over yonder, roundabout… Strike here, strike there. And the first thing you know, that thing really got hold (??).

A: Well, like in '34, I think they had a successful miners' strike, which was right before the textile strike.

F: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, well, they was several that really had success in their strikes. Several. And it got everybody kind of to want a piece of that pie (??).

A: Yeah. That—that, in a way, I didn't want to show my hand, because I wanted to find out where you—you thought it was coming from. But that—that's basically the way I think it went down. And that is, when your back—when your back's to the wall, and when you're starving to death, you'll do anything. But you usually won't revolt unless you think you stand a chance of coming—

F: Of coming out on top.

A: So, so it's like you say, the sort of thing when—when you see a little opportunity, then it looks like a chance for—for—to expand even more.

F: Yeah.

A: Because if you just look, if you just were not involved in the situation and stood and looked at it from an accountant's point of view, the 1934 strike made no sense at all. Because, here, the real wages had increased by fifty percent. Most workers didn't know it, but Avondale had stockpiled the goods, you know. They had all the count they needed. So, you really didn't have any leverage. But it gets down to that human dimension of wanting to go as far as you can, and many of those workers, as you probably know from the brief experience you had, had spent a lifetime of just barely hanging on.

F: That's right. That's all they were doing.

A: Yeah.

F: Now, you know, that is—that's good point right there. The management of the union local, I wonder if they were familiar with the stockpile.

A: I don't think so. I think it was just, you know, an emotional reaction. If I find others, it would be interesting, you know, to check out this situation. But, of course, the leadership was older and so most of them are going to be dead by now.

F: Now, back there, then, there was no such thing as your unemployment, you know. You didn't have no way of… and I imagine a lot of them people really suffered.

A: Yeah.

F: 'Cause they didn't have no way.

A: From what—from what I can see, unless you were just starving, you didn't go for relief, you know the pride there. I was talking to one person. Well, it was Flora. Everyone in her family worked in the mill at the time, except Otis; he was already a fireman. So, when all of them were thrown out of work, he was the only one with an income, but they just hung on and were able to make it through. "But," she said, "we just refused to go to Esau, you know." And that had to be rough, like she said. Some people had to be bad off.

F: Did they have any kind of aid for them there in Avondale?

A: Well, they had this Esau House I was referring to. [It] was a federal relief agency in South Avondale. And people would go there to get groceries and things. And, of course, the people that the only work they had was at the mill, those families were forced to turn to the federal relief agencies. So, I don't think anybody starved to death, but—

F: No, never did hear of any people starving, never heard of anything like that, but—

A: 'Course, a lot of the people who had just come in from the farm probably went back to live with relatives, during that time.

F: Well, I look back, a lot of times, on Avondale and there was a lot of good memories in there, good friends, good times. Used to be a lot of parties in Avondale.

A: Yeah.

F: Now, they had them on Saturday nights.

A: Yeah, I hear about the square dancing.

F: Yeah.

A: And I'm sure a few private ones were going on.

F: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there was a lot of good times back in those days. See, you didn't have the entertainments that the world has got now, back there, then. You didn't have no television, you didn't have nothing like that. You had a little old radio, but you didn't have nothing to compare with what we got today. Young people, there was a dance somewhere in Avondale every Saturday night. You could just—if you didn't know where, just have to get out and find it. There was one somewhere.

A: Yeah, that—that brings, now, again, since you didn't live in the community, you may not have been aware, but that brings up another thing I'm trying to track down. How much of the rural culture remained when people would come down to the mill from the country? In other words, take the dances. Of course, I imagine the young people were doing the latest, but where the old people trying to hang onto things like square dances and ballads?

F: No, not too much. No. It wasn't. We'd have square dances, the young people would have square dances. I used to call square dances. And, we'd have square dances. We'd square dance a while and then just have regular dance, whatever, whatever the dance was.

A: Yeah.

F: Yeah.

A: Well, what about other things that we might call folkways: things like quilt-making—

F: Now, people did a lot of that in their homes, women. Yeah, there was a lot of that, doing their own—

A: Well, I'll tell you one thing from the people I've talked to: one thing that they definitely held onto was the ability of the folk to weave tales. If you can ever get someone started on an anecdote, they—they can put a word picture that I could never dream of doing. You know, to where you, I don't mean tales in the sense of false stories, but I mean tales in the sense of weaving a story to where you feel like you are sitting there at the time. That ability to speak and—

F: Well, that goes back, in memory, to these experiences they have. Well, a lot of times, they…they were wonderful. They were actually wonderful. But, at the same time, at the time it was happening, you didn't think anything about it.

A: And I think a part of why it was so wonderful—I hear someone recently say that—that a person can't have true happiness until they've known hardship. 'Cause you've got to know hardship to know—

F: To know what you've got.

A: To appreciate the good times. And I think that's one thing I'm finding in talking with people about the 30s. I have a feeling a lot of people who grew up and came into adulthood in the 30s are much happier today than, say, the next generation, which had everything.

F: Well, I tell you something else, too. I think [it] has got a lot to do with that, we were taught to work when I was a child. And that's something of the past.

A: And the work was not drudgery. It was something you did.

F: That's right.

A: And you didn't think about if it was wonderful or think about it—

F: That's right. You didn't question it; you did it.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

F: And we all worked, everybody. And I made my own way, you might say, from the time I was twelve, thirteen years old, going to school. My dad never had to buy me anything in school. It didn't cost him a dollar to send me to grade school.

A: Well, see, I'm probably coming out of the last of that era because I grew up in a small town, grew up a working-class family. It didn't cost my dad a dollar for me to go through college, because I worked my way.

F: You worked your way through.

A: But I was one of the few.

F: Well, now, that's what I say, you see. It didn't cost him a whole lot of money to send us to school, like at, back in those days. We worked our ways through our schools. Made our own way. Bought your own clothes.

A: It's like, of course, six kids nowadays, I don't see how they make it, but he had an unwritten rule that—that as long you're home, we'll help you out. But if you want to go off to college or whatever, you've got to make it on your own.

F: Well, now, you take my children when I—when they were going to school. I worked two jobs to put my kids through school. Two jobs, besides my church.

A: Well, that—

F: Well, the Lord blessed me and I did it.

A: My dad was working a job and then he had a truck yard and a car wash on the side. So, basically he had two, but of course, things have improved greatly for him now. That's only been within—well, since I left home that, as fewer kids were gathering around the table and that sort of thing. And he's a postman, so they started getting this cost of living escalation. So, for the past ten years, he has relatively one well. Let me cut the tape off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]